

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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Festival Finds Itself Sitting Pretty on Chilmark Sofas at Ten Years

By MEGAN DOOLEY

It took the Martha's Vineyard Film Festival about three years to get into the casual character it has enjoyed for the past seven. In the first year, a black and white printout distributed the day before the Grange Hall screenings announced a one-day program consisting of a collection of shorts, a few features and some ethnic food. The next year, a move to the Katharine Cornell Theatre in Vineyard Haven eliminated the food; eating wasn't allowed at the site, so the festival moved again.

The "aha" moment, according to the festival's creator and director Thomas Bena, came in year three, when the festival happened at the food-friendly Chilmark Community Center, which was outfitted with an assortment of couches and the festival's own projector and screen, donated by a generous fan.



photo by Elizabeth Cecil

Thomas Bena.

And that is where the festival has remained and will next Friday kick off its 10th anniversary weekend on the Island.

"Initially, there wasn't a lot of thought behind it," said Mr. Bena in an interview at the festival office above the Chilmark Tavern this week. "I just went to the Chilmark library and wrote a cultural grant for a film festival. I didn't know what else to call it. I'd never been to one ... So the vision was that simple."

Seated behind his desk in the space he shares with the festival's new managing director, Brian Ditchfield, Mr. Bena's attention is in a million different places at once. He scrawls last minute e-mails to filmmakers and fields calls from distributors — and one from his wife, festival advisor Mollie Doyle. The

bookshelves that line one wall are packed with festival programs from past years, a DVD library of film's they've screened, and a collection of festival memorabilia including mugs and canvas bags marked with the simple logo: silhouettes of a tree, a house, a man, and his video camera. Large sheets of white paper scribbled with this year's tentative screening schedule are posted haphazardly on an adjacent wall.

Whatever his initial intentions, the festival has grown. "The vision has only expanded because of the community involvement," said Mr. Bena, who came into it as a carpenter who simply wanted some more winter film options than the box office picks that played at local cinemas. "If they didn't want this, I wouldn't be doing it."

To be sure, Vineyarders do want this film festival. They want the ethnic cuisine that is otherwise tough to find on the Island. They want to sit back in comfy couches while they enjoy the films, carefully selected by a screening committee made up of five sets of eyes. While it is a much smaller scale than, say, Sundance, it has the Vineyard written all over it.

"We're not bringing a template for a film festival to Martha's Vineyard," said Mr. Bena. "I really think that it's a very unique representation of what is called a film festival. And I'm really happy about that. I like the fact that you can sit on a couch and there's an award-winning international filmmaker right next to you sharing the same bowl of curry."

Vineyarders are traditionally blasé about celebrity sightings. It is this trait that makes the Island a sort of safe haven for stars; they can enjoy a quiet vacation without being accosted by swarming fans. But even Mr. Bena, who has lived on the Island for over a decade now, was surprised to see last year's festival-goers flock around the subject of one of the documentary features, an unassuming man who had spent decades in prison before being acquitted of a crime he didn't commit, while Academy Award-winning actress Marisa Tomei stood nearby, largely unnoticed.



Festival crew: Brian Ditchfield, Thomas Bena and Lindsey Scott are ready.

"We don't do the red carpet, we don't do the local photo op. We don't do that," said Mr. Bena. "And I like that there's not hype, but there's substance."

Like Mr. Bena, Vineyarders seem to be more taken with real-life stories and characters. And the festival reflects that preference, with a program that is often made up of more documentary than narrative features.

“What’s that saying? Real life is stranger than fiction,” said Mr. Bena. “I really believe that . . . I just think there are so many stories that don’t make the light of day. I always root for the underdog. I always have, since I was a little kid. I think there are so many amazing people . . . I guess I’m curious about people who are on the fringes but who have really big ideas, and that often comes in the form of a documentary.”

His four-member screening committee helps to balance out the selections, choosing this year from over 150 films that they felt best followed the festival mission, to find films that inspire discussion, debate and action.

They often bring to the Island people involved in the filmmaking to speak on behalf of their films and answer questions from the audience. This year the festival will host contributors to six of the films in the program. Director Lucien Castaing-Taylor will talk and take questions following the screening of his film *Sweetgrass*, as will *One Too Many Mornings* director Michael Mohan. *Transcendent Man* director and producer Barry Ptolemy and Felicia Ptolemy, and *Reel Injun* codirector Jeremiah Hayes will speak following their screenings. Michael Ruppert, the subject of the festival opening feature *Collapse* will lead a discussion after the screening, as will Whitney, a girl featured in *Girls on the Wall*, and the film’s director Heather Ross.

Additionally, the festival staff has organized two new events, called “talkbacks,” which will provide a more intimate setting for discussion. The first, featuring Mr. Ruppert, Mr. Ptolemy and Ms. Ptolemy discussing their differing visions of the future of civilization, will be held at the Chilmark Public Library Saturday morning; Chilmark’s Warren Doty will moderate discussion. The New Yorker magazine’s film critic David Denby will lead the second discussion, about contemporary American film, at the community center Sunday evening.

“That’s sort of what sets this experience apart,” said Mr. Ditchfield. “When the filmmaker is there, or somebody from the film is there inspiring that discussion, all of a sudden the community engages in conversation and you start talking to your neighbor or somebody random whom you didn’t know, about the film. It sort of breaks those walls down, which is really nice.”

At its core, the film festival is more than just a series of screenings or a chance to break up the cold Island winter. It has become a cultural event, a festival of ideas, and a communal affair that brings the small Vineyard community even closer together.

“The analogy I’ve used over and over again is the wedding,” said Mr. Bena. “You meet someone on a Friday night, you catch their eye on Saturday, and by Sunday you’re having a really good conversation with them. By Sunday night, you’ve made a new friend. That’s what I hope the festival is. A place for reconnecting old

friendships and making new friends.”

The film festival will be held at the Chilmark Community Center from March 12 to 14. A pullout program with a complete festival schedule and descriptions of the films is included in this week's Gazette.

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